

***Recovering* – an introduction to the work of Nick Malone**

Nick Malone's drive to create gives form and validity to his own experience. Painting is everything to him. It corresponds to an internal, coherent world - a universe parallel to the uncertain one he is inhabiting. Such justifications are appropriately dramatic, for *Recovering* comprises painting that is at war with itself. The work progresses formal ideas which have informed Malone's painting for over a decade. His pictorial concerns emanate from a reverence for and an affinity with artistic achievements of the past. These range from the suggestive qualities of pre-historic cave painting through to the sophisticated primitivism of Jean Dubuffet, the monumental abstraction of Franz Kline and the spirited, graphic gestures of Cy Twombly.

The *Recovering* paintings are beautiful like wounds can be - glowing and brutal, raw and penetrating. For the artist, beauty is about harmony, about "the balance being right". For me, the beauty of Malone's painting comes from intuitive expression, feminine sensibility and deliberation - power driven by emotion. They are about recovery, recovering emotion, covering over, reclaiming, retrieving what was lost - literally and metaphorically. One might expect the graphic response to such concepts to be a serene, visual analogy of bathing away battering and pain. These are, however, more loaded with the tension of recovery and re-covering, the uncertainty, the hidden fury of bruising. These are charged, unsettled surfaces being knocked about to resolution.

Although they resonate with the energies of both the land and the sea - the former particularly prevalent in earlier series of works - *Recovering* is not site specific. Malone seeks not to build an overtly narrative or directly referential image but to concentrate on the metaphysical. Thought is expressed materially by the action of putting on the paint; the idea is contained within the movement of the creative act. "Thought becomes the manipulation of materials fusing with describing the idea; they become completely intermingled. I can't say what the idea is in words because it's visual. The idea itself is that visual fusing". The finished product, a collection of many thousands of thoughts, merely hints at the complexity of this conceptual and tangible layering. At the same time, the whole history of the work can be absorbed subliminally in a moment.

Recurring forms like the crucifix or sand-bar make basic statements of shape. These dissolve and re-emerge - sometimes subtly, sometimes clear and insistent, depending on the mood of the picture. Charcoal lines, reminiscent of cave drawings, or the icon of a fish or a figure in wax-resist, occasionally feature like a transient cast of characters opening up possibilities of association and interconnection. "The paintings are physical bodies; they relate to physical forms outside themselves." The pictures are thoughts disturbed. At the same time they are constrained and contained by their own structural dynamics. The compositional framework, intuitive to a certain extent, supports the materiality of time as charted by stuff on paper. The turbulent marriage between hard-edged drawing and gestural swipes of soft paint is a covert, rather than nihilistic,

sabotage of aesthetic calm. There are paradoxes and contrasts within the paintings but nothing that jars one to a halt. To deliberately wreck what is potentially beautiful would be too facile a statement. "It's too easy to impose your will on a picture. The difficulty of painting is letting it assume its own identity, letting the paint itself work. Colours and materials transmit messages to one another and pick up echoes.... The picture then takes its own direction and becomes like a medley of sounds....." The interrelationship of the painting's elements sparks the whole into rumbling with an internal, electric dialogue which resonates long after one's gaze has gone.

The paintings offer a sense of travelling with the painter through time - time contained within the paintings. They capture an essence of physical existence, "like piercing a veil and going into another world.... Not a fantasy world like a Gothic landscape, for example, but one which is constructed in its own terms and develops its own coherence". Liberating himself from the notion of fixed point perspective, the artist says that this "...opens up a world of much wider ranging associations, possibilities and information". In such abandonment he works with the stuff that has nourished the ideology and composition of visual traditions for centuries. The larger pieces have the monumental potential of a frieze or mural. Acrylic medium combines with plaster, earth pigments and charcoal on paper which is then knocked back and reworked several times. The resulting rich palimpsest seems to call up primal memories of the earliest of man's daubings, awakened by the surprising light of a lapis-blue streak, a fiery vermilion slash, or a bright smear of raw, yellow ochre. A light, breath-of-air quality occasionally pays homage to Turner, preventing the paintings from resonating as brooding or heavy laden. These are, however, anxious pieces infused with urgency, reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism. Yet they contain an element of suppression, as if the control of materials is more important than emotional release - or anarchy.

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Libby Anson is a contributor to a variety of Arts Magazines including Art Monthly and Contemporary Visual Arts and has recently written the leading general introduction to the world of art, *An A to Z of Art*, published by Carlton.

frontispiece *Ashkelon* (detail)
8 x 5 ft
acrylic, pigment and plaster on paper